

# COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
February 2, 2017

## Sonoma County Lawns to Habitat Project

Project No. 16-057-01  
Project Manager: Peter Jarausch

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$81,690 to Conservation Corps North Bay to implement demonstration projects that will convert up to 20,000 square feet of irrigated lawn in disadvantaged communities to habitat gardens to reduce water usage and improve habitat for endangered salmonids in Sonoma County.

**LOCATION:** Sonoma County

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Resource Enhancement

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### **EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: [Project Location](#)

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### **RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of up to eighty-one thousand six hundred and ninety dollars (\$81,690.00) to Conservation Corps North Bay (CCNB) to implement demonstration projects that will convert up to 20,000 square feet of irrigated lawn in disadvantaged communities to habitat gardens to reduce water usage and improve habitat for endangered salmonids in Sonoma County. This authorization is subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to disbursement of funds, CCNB shall submit for review and approval by the Executive Officer of the Conservancy:
  - a. A work program including a schedule and budget for the project.

- b. All contractors to be retained for the project.
- c. Documentation that all funding required for the project has been secured.
- 2. Prior to the commencement of construction of the project CCNB shall submit for review and approval by the Executive Officer:
  - a. Evidence that all necessary permits and approvals have been obtained
  - b. Landowner agreements allowing for installation and maintenance of the project for a reasonable period of time.

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

- 1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding Coastal Resource Enhancement Projects.
- 2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
- 3. Conservation Corps North Bay is a nonprofit organization existing under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”

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#### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to eighty-one thousand six hundred and ninety dollars (\$81,690) to Conservation Corps North Bay (CCNB) to implement demonstration projects that will convert up to 20,000 square feet of irrigated lawn to habitat gardens for the Sonoma County Lawns to Habitat Project (“Project”). This authorization will enable CCNB to help reduce water usage at four locations that serve disadvantaged communities in Sonoma County, create demonstration projects to educate the local community about

improved landscaping practices, and provide job training for individuals from disadvantaged communities.

The last four years of drought have left flows in nearly all Sonoma County streams and rivers at record lows levels, placing further strains on anadromous fish which depend on healthy flows to survive. Climate change, with its potential for further longer periods of drought, is likely to exacerbate this problem over the coming decades. In spite of these challenges much of the landscaping around public and commercial buildings in Sonoma County is maintained as irrigated lawn (turf). The negative impacts from using turf for landscaping include: high need for water, little habitat value, often intensive use of pesticides and herbicides which then enter the watershed, and shallow root systems which do not open the soil to permit infiltration and groundwater recharge.

The proposed project consists of implementation of a series of demonstration projects that convert irrigated turf to habitat gardens providing many benefits including:

- reduced water use, potentially allowing more water to stay in the Russian River and benefit fish;
- improved groundwater infiltration - the roots of native plants open up the soil more effectively and allow for natural cleaning of the groundwater and ameliorate high flows in nearby streams;
- improved habitat for native pollinators; and
- decreased use of herbicides, pesticides and gas powered lawn equipment with their associated negative environmental effects.

The conversion to habitat gardens will directly benefit disadvantaged communities. First the work will take place at educational institutions either located within disadvantaged communities, or ones that directly benefit those communities. These locations will get both the benefit of saving money on irrigation and landscaping costs, and educational opportunities for their students and families. The converted gardens will be used as platforms for public education on water use reduction and CCNB's partner in the project, the Sonoma County Water Agency (SWCA), will provide schools with science curriculum for the students, which will include a monitoring and evaluation component, and signage to educate nearby residents on the multiple benefits of converting turf to habitat gardens. In addition to benefitting disadvantaged schools, the work of converting the turf to habitat gardens will largely be performed by CCNB crews

which draw directly from lower income areas in Sonoma and Marin counties. These crews will gain additional job skills by conducting the sheet mulching, drip irrigation system installation, and habitat garden planting. CCNB Corps members work four days a week in the field and spend one day a week pursuing the completion of their high school diploma or GED.

Costs for the project will be shared as follows:

- Labor and materials for the conversion of turf to habitat gardens will be funded through this authorization and by SCWA funds.
- Master Gardener services to design the habitat gardens will be funded by SCWA.
- Plants and drip irrigation supplies and materials will be provided by the property owners
- Public education and evaluation services will be provided by SCWA on an in-kind basis.

CCNB has over a twenty-year track record of successfully completing resource projects including trail construction, fuels reduction, stream restoration, invasive species removal, and landscaping for public agencies. They have worked in partnership with nearly every public land owner in Marin County, and have been growing their program in Sonoma County. CCNB's crews are made up of energetic 18-to-25 year olds from lower income areas in Marin, Sonoma, and western portions of Contra Costa County. These Corps members gain important job experience in the environmental field through the natural resource projects while at the same time furthering their education.

### **Site Description:**

The proposed project will take place at four schools in Sonoma County that are excited to work with CCNB: Guerneville School District, Santa Rosa Junior College, Petaluma Campus, Analy High School in Sebastopol, and Healdsburg Junior High School. All of these schools rely on water from the Sonoma County Water Agency which draws much of its supply from the Russian River. Each is also within a disadvantaged community or directly serves one. Each school also has extensive turf landscaping which school administrators would like to convert to a more sustainable form of landscaping.

### **Project History:**

CCNB developed the project in partnership with the SCWA to reduce the need for water from the Russian River and improve resilience to climate change. It was submitted to the Conservancy in Round 3 of the Conservancy's Proposition 1 grant solicitations. The most recent project that

CCNB has undertaken with funding from the Conservancy was to assist with landscaping at the Hamilton Field restoration project.

The Conservancy has a long history of supporting projects that improve conditions in the Russian River Watershed. These have included watershed restoration projects in Austin Creek, Green Valley Creek, Dutch Bill Creek, and numerous others. Additional efforts have focused on creating off channel habitat for juvenile salmonids, reducing the impacts from septic systems in Monte Rio, and piloting off stream irrigation ponds to reduce the demand for summer water withdrawals.

#### **PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$81,690</b>
Sonoma County Water Agency	62,000
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$143,690</b>

The expected source of Conservancy funds for this project is the fiscal year 2015/16 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014 (Proposition 1, Water Code § 79700 et seq.). Funds appropriated to the Conservancy derive from Chapter 6 (commencing with § 79730) and may be used “for multi-benefit water quality, water supply, and watershed protection and restoration projects for the watersheds of the state” (Section 79731). Section 79732 identifies specific purposes of Chapter 6 and includes: protect and restore aquatic, wetland and migratory bird ecosystems, including fish and wildlife corridors; protect and restore coastal watersheds, including, but not limited to bays, marine estuaries, and nearshore ecosystems; and assist in the recovery of endangered, threatened or migratory species by improving watershed health, instream flows, fish passage and coastal or inland wetland restoration. The proposed project will help achieve these purposes of Proposition 1 by improving watershed health to benefit endangered fish.

As required by Proposition 1, the proposed project provides multiple benefits. By converting turf to native landscaping the project will reduce irrigation needs and improve flows in the Russian River as well as improve habitat in the Russian River Watershed.

The proposed project was selected through a competitive grant process under the Conservancy's Proposition 1 Grant Program Guidelines adopted in June 2015 ("Prop 1 Guidelines"). (See § 79706(a)). The proposed project meets each of the evaluation criteria in the Prop 1 Guidelines as described in further detail in this "Project Financing" section, the "Project Summary" section and the "Consistency with Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines" section of this report.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The proposed authorization is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Section 31220), regarding the protection of coastal and marine resources.

Section 31220(a) authorizes the Conservancy to award grants for coastal watershed and coastal and marine habitat water quality and living marine resources protection and restoration projects, provided that such project one or more of the objectives detailed in 31220(b).

Subsections (2) and (6) of section 31220 (b) specifically authorize projects that protect or restore fish and wildlife habitat within coastal watersheds or that protect and restore sensitive watershed lands, including watershed lands draining to sensitive coastal or marine areas. Consistent with these subsections, the proposed authorization provides funds to CCNB to reduce water usage and improve fish habitat in the Russian River Watershed by converting turf landscaping to native gardens.

As also required by Section 31220(a), Conservancy staff has consulted with the State Water Resources Control Board in the development of the project or grant to ensure consistency with Chapter 3 (commencing with Section 30915) of Division 20.4 of the Public Resources Code.

Finally, consistent with Section 31220(c) the proposed project includes a monitoring and evaluation component and is consistent with regional, local or State watershed management and water quality plans or programs, as described in the "Consistency with Local Watershed Management Plan/State Water Quality Control Plan" section, below.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2013 STRATEGIC PLAN  
GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S), AS REVISED JUNE 25, 2015:**

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective D** of the Conservancy's 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, the proposed project implements a project to enhance coastal watersheds.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S  
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on October 2, 2014, in the following respects:

**Required Criteria**

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.

3. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:**

*California Water Action Plan* (2014). The California Natural Resources Agency, California Environmental Protection Agency, and California Department of Food and Agriculture developed this Water Action Plan to meet three broad objectives: more reliable water supplies, the restoration of species and habitat, and a more resilient, sustainably managed water resources system. This project will advance the following goals of the Plan: "1. Make Conservation a California Way of Life". The proposed project will expand urban water conservation and efficiency efforts directly as well as provide public education to spread the word about the feasibility and importance of reducing the water used by landscaping.

*California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report* (Governor's Office of Planning and Research, 2013 Draft). By installing native gardens, the proposed project will promote this policy under Key Action #3 of the "Preserve and Steward State Lands and Natural Resources" section of this report, which calls for building resilience in natural systems and specifically calls out the need to maintain intact ecosystems and necessary habitat for the state's native species and provide migration corridors.

4. **Support of the public:** See "Exhibit 2: Project Letters"

5. **Location:** The project is located in Guerneville, Sebastopol, and Healdsburg all within the Russian River Watershed. Improving habitat in these locations will improve water quality in the watershed which, in turn, will improve conditions for salmonids, a priceless coastal resource. The final location in Petaluma will also reduce water taken from the Russian River and reduce storm water flowing into the Petaluma Slough, a tributary to San Francisco Bay.
6. **Need:** Conservancy funding is needed to undertake this project because the disadvantaged communities which this project benefits do not have the resources to do the work otherwise.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The project will reduce water use on a regional level, and will provided necessary education to farther reduce water use, a statewide goal.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The project locations are all well inland and will not be affected by Sea Level Rise.

#### **Additional Criteria**

9. **Urgency:** After four years of drought in Sonoma County it is critical to reduce water needs.
10. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
11. **Readiness:** The CCNB is ready to undertake the project and has sufficient crews to do so.
12. **Cooperation:** The project is a cooperative partnership between three school districts, the Sonoma County Water Agency, Santa Rosa Junior College, and the Conservation Corps North Bay.
13. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The proposed project will improve resilience to the anticipated impacts of climate change. By using native plants and drip irrigation systems less water will be used and the plants will be able to tolerate periods of drought. In addition, native plants have deeper root systems and can help water soak into the ground at a higher rate better capturing what rainfall does occur and ameliorating periods of heavy rain.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN/  
STATE WATER QUALITY CONTROL PLAN:**

The project helps implement the following 2012 Russian River Integrated Watershed Management Plan Goals:

Goal III: Protect and Improve Water Quality

Objective 33 Document and showcase successes among diverse land use types within the watershed. (Page 12)

Goal V: Develop and Maintain Public Stewardship

Objective 45 Encourage public education and learning opportunities (page 14)

Objective 46 Identify partnerships and community relationships that leverage resources and funding. (page 14)

The project will serve as a public demonstration project that highlights water conservation for commercial properties and will serve as a site for public education. Additional it will bring new partners to the table with the involvement of the Conservation Corps North Bay and local schools.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The project is categorically exempt under section 15333 of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) because it is a small habitat restoration project that cumulatively does not exceed five acres in size and involves the maintenance, restoration, enhancement, or protection of habitat for fish plants, or wildlife. The project meets the additional conditions of this categorical exemption in that there would be no significant adverse impact on endangered, rare or threatened species or their habitat pursuant to CEQA Guidelines section 15065; there are no hazardous materials at or around the site; and the project will not result in significant impacts when viewed in connection with the effects of past, present, or probable future projects.